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ABSTRACT

Theories implicit in college presidents' definitions of leadership are examined, since understanding presidents' leadership models may affect how they interpret their roles and the events they encounter. The source of the theory that is analyzed is the organizational leadership literature. Research traditions in organizational leadership are grouped into five major categories: trait theories, power and influence theories, behavioral theories, contingency theories, and symbolic theories. To identify presidential definitions of leadership, interview data were obtained from 32 college and university presidents as part of the Institutional Leadership Project sponsored by the National Center for Postsecondary Governance and Finance. Two of five implied theoretical orientations of the presidents appeared to predominate. The first orientation is the presidential perception that leadership is a process of influence; the second is that leadership behavior is seen as emphasizing goals. The sample of presidents identified leadership, at least in part, in terms of roles and behaviors. Presidential definitions did not appear to be systematically related to factors such as institutional type, control, or presidential tenure. Sixteen references are included. (SW)

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THE IMPLICIT LEADERSHIP THEORIES OF COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS

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THE IMPLICIT LEADERSHIP THEORIES OF COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS

It is easy to talk about organizational leadership, but difficult to study it. Literally thousands of essays, research reports, and other scholarly and practical works have provided a rich pool of provocative but often conflicting ideas. Although much has been learned about leadership, there is still no agreement on how leadership can be defined, measured, assessed, or linked to outcomes, and "no clear and unequivocal understanding exists as to what distinguishes leaders from nonleaders, and perhaps more important, what distinguishes effective leaders from ineffective leaders" (Bennis and Nanus, 1985, p.4).

Most studies of leadership have taken place in business organizations, the military, and governmental agencies, with little attention given to higher education (Vroom, 1983). The study of leadership in colleges and universities is even more difficult than in many other settings because of the dual control systems, conflicts between professional and administrative authority, unclear goals, and other unique properties of normative, professional organizations. In particular, the relationship between those identified as leaders and those whom they presume to lead is problematic. Some theoretical approaches assert that "leadership" in

organizations can only be understood in the context of "followership." But in higher education, there is a strong resistance to leadership as it is generally understood in more traditional and hierarchical organizations, and it is often more accurate to think of faculty as constituents rather than as followers.

With few exceptions (Cohen and March, 1974; Dill and Fullager, 1987; Hollander, 1987), studies of leadership in higher education have tended to be atheoretical, and for the most part not explicitly grounded in the organizational leadership literature. This paper is an attempt to advance the study of leadership in higher education by examining the theories implicit in college presidents' definitions of leadership. Understanding the leadership models implicitly held by presidents is important because these models may affect how they interpret their roles and find meaning in the flow of events they encounter.

The source of the theory presented in this paper is the organizational leadership literature, particularly as it is represented in major summaries of research findings (Gibb, 1968; House and Betz, 1979; Bass, 1981; Yukl, 1981; Hollander, 1985). The source of presidential definitions of leadership is interview data collected from 32 college and university presidents.

Research traditions in organizational leadership can be grouped into five major categories. The boundaries of these categories are fluid, and they are neither mutually exclusive nor consistent. However, they do provide a convenient way of organizing an otherwise overwhelming array of materials. The categories include trait theories that identify specific characteristics that are believed to contribute to a person's ability to assume and successfully function in leadership positions; power and influence theories that attempt to understand leadership in terms of the source and amount of power available to leaders, and the manner in which leaders exercise power over followers through either unilateral or reciprocal interactions; behavioral theories that study leadership by examining activity patterns, managerial roles, and behavior categories of leaders - that is, by considering what it is that leaders actually do; contingency theories that emphasize the importance of situational factors, such as the nature of the task performed by a group, or the nature of the external environment, in order to understand effective leadership; and symbolic theories that assume that leadership is a social attribution that permits people to cognitively connect outcomes to causes and thereby make sense of an equivocal, fluid, and complex world.

The purpose of this study was to analyze the implicit leadership theories of college and university presidents to determine the extent to which they reflect various models of organizational leadership.

Methods and Data Sources

Data were collected through on-site, semi-structured interviews with the presidents of 32 institutions participating in the Institutional Leadership Project, a five year longitudinal study of college and university leadership being conducted by the National Center for Postsecondary Governance and Finance. The institutions were a purposive sample selected to represent different institutional types (eight universities, state colleges, independent colleges, and community colleges), length of presidential tenure, institutional program, geographic location, and other structural and programmatic characteristics. Three researchers conducted the three-hour presidential interviews at the various research sites following a common protocol.

Data in this study were prepared from responses to one of the interview questions:

The word "leadership" is used all the time, but people don't always agree on what it means. What does the word "leadership" mean to you?

Responses to this question were typically short, ranging from one sentence to several paragraphs in length. Each response was broken down into separate words, phrases, or other appropriate analytical components. The components were then compared with the five different approaches to the study of organizational leadership to determine the extent to which any or all of them were reflected in presidential views of the meaning of leadership.

Although it is reasonable to believe that the theories implicit in a president's definitions of leadership will affect what that president does, it should be remembered that what a person says and what they do are not always consonant (March, 1984; Argyris and Schoen, 1974). These data therefore cannot be taken as an indication of actual presidential behavior, and indeed distortions may have occurred even in an analysis of what presidents said. For example, some may have responded by giving what they thought was a professionally desirable answer, and indeed several presidents prefaced their definitions by saying that they had a text-book response. It should also be remembered that just because a president

may not include traits or power, for example, in a response does not necessarily mean that the president does not believe them to be important. Finally, it may be that the word "leadership" itself provokes responses that focus on certain behaviors and deemphasize others. For example, although it is generally agreed that coping with a turbulent environment is an increasingly important aspect of the presidential role, presidents in this study defined it almost exclusively as dealing with internal rather than external relations.

Analyzing the Components of Presidential Definitions of Leadership

The distribution of the implied leadership theories of college and university presidents is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

Trait theories, contingency theories, and symbolic theories were seen in the responses of only a small number of presidents. The majority of presidents described leadership from two perspectives; power and influence, and behavior.

Power and Influence Theories. There are two major theoretical orientations to power and influence. In the first orientation, the leader is seen as using various sources of social power in a one-way attempt to influence others. Five bases of such social power have been suggested (French and Raven, 1959). Leaders can influence others through their offices because of the authority provided by our social and legal systems (legitimate power), and through their ability to provide rewards (reward power) and to threaten punishments (coercive power). Leaders can also influence others with their own personalities through their perceived expertise (expert power), and to the extent others personally identify with and like them (referent power).

In the second orientation to power and influence, leaders are seen as engaging in interaction with followers resulting in mutual influence through social exchange (Blau, 1964). While social power theories emphasize one-way influence, social exchange theories emphasize two-way mutual influence and reciprocal relationships between leaders who provide needed services to a group in exchange for the group's approval and compliance with the leader's demands. The authority of leader influence is constrained by the expectations of followers.

Of the 32 presidents in the sample, the responses of 28 could be coded as reflecting perceptions of leadership influence as either a one-way (social power) or two-way (social exchange) process. The majority of the respondents (20) defined leadership as a one-way process whose function was to get others to comply with or conform to the leader's directives. The use of social power was commonly expressed through phrases such as "the power of persuasion," "getting people to buy into your goals," or "getting people to act positively." For 8 other presidents, influence was seen as a process of exchange involving "shared concepts of responsibility," the "assimilation [of the goals of others] and the articulation of goals," or other mutual process in which leaders and followers "collectively move the institution."

Behavioral Theories. Almost all (31, or 96.9%) of the presidents included in their definitions of leadership specific activity patterns, managerial roles, or behavioral categories. Four groupings were prevalent. The two most important were expressing goals, and motivating to action. Two of lesser importance were managing, and providing psychological support and inspiration.

The most frequently expressed behaviors of leadership (24 presidents) were those referring to institutional

goals. Common references included "setting direction," "setting goals," "providing vision," and "knowing where to go." The use of the word "vision" was quite common, and it was not always possible to determine its meaning to the presidents. For some, it apparently referred to articulating a future state, while for others it seemed synonymous with the development of an agenda.

The second most frequently expressed behavior of leadership (21 presidents) was concerned with moving people to action in support of the goals. Typical phrases defined leadership in terms of behaviors that would "set the pace," "mobilize," "move people," "stimulate," or "serve as a catalyst." The most common expression was to "motivate;" the most evocative was to "nudge."

Many presidents expected leaders to provide administrative support for the achievement of goals, and such managerial activities were the third most frequently mentioned (12 presidents). Responses in this category included "choosing means," "mobilizing resources," "making decisions," "planning," "good communications," "providing structure and process," and "recruiting colleagues."

In addition to providing managerial support, leadership was also seen by some as including the provision of psychological support. Ten presidents mentioned the need to "inspire," to "raise aspirations,"

to provide a "sense of achievement," to "make the institution feel good about itself," to "encourage," and to "challenge."

Correlates of Implied Leadership Theories. Patterns of implied leadership theories were analyzed to determine whether differences existed between presidents based upon their institutional type (university, state college, independent college, community college), control (public or private) or the length of their tenure in office (16 "new" presidents had been in office less than three years; 16 "old" presidents had been in office more than five years). The observed differences were modest. Presidents of four-year colleges, both public and private, were more likely (10 of 16) to define leadership in power/influence terms than were presidents of universities or community colleges (5 of 16); presidents of public institutions were more likely to include contingency factors in their definitions (6 of 20) than were private college presidents (1 of 12); and community college presidents were less likely to include symbolic elements in their definitions (0 of 8) than other presidents (7 of 24). There were no differences observed between new and old presidents.

Goals and Influence in Presidential Definitions of Leadership

In the previous section presidential definitions of leadership were disaggregated into elements that were then analyzed in terms of theoretical approaches to leadership. Two of the five implied theoretical orientations appeared to predominate. The first orientation is the presidential perception that leadership is a process of influence; the second is that leadership behavior is seen as emphasizing goals.

A general hypothesis can be derived by combining these two orientations: College and university presidents in general define leadership as a process of influence directed towards the achievement of goals. There is nothing extraordinary about this definition, but it hides within it two important questions that are often overlooked in studying higher education. First, what is the source of the goals that are to be pursued? And second, what is the nature of the process by which influence is to be exerted?

Sources of Goals. The concept of goals appears frequently in discussions of college and university governance and management, even though it is one of the most problematic constructs in the organization literature

(Simon, 1964), although . Goals are often treated as if they were organizational "givens," and little attention is given to where they originate. Reanalysis of the interview responses indicated that presidents either implicitly or explicitly identified three potential sources of the institutional goals whose achievement was to be influenced. The first source was undefined but presumably inherent in the organization itself, and was identified by presidents who used terms such as "the mission," "agreed-upon goals," or "institutional goals" without further description. For this paper we will refer to this source of goals as "mission-directed."

The second potential source was the leader. Respondents identifying this source emphasized the leader's responsibility to achieve "directions you want," to "provide direction," to "set goals," or to "provide vision." For this paper we will identify this source as "leader-directed." The third source was seen as the group itself. Presidents who emphasized this source defined goals in terms of "the highest aspirations of the group," or "where people want to go." This source will be referred to as "follower-directed."

Implementing Goals. Whether presidents see leaders as accepting goals as defined by the institution, creating goals of their own, or discovering the goals of their

followers, they are likely to believe that the leader has an important role in influencing their achievement. Presidential responses indicate two alternative orientations to how influence was to be achieved.

The first orientation identified the presidential role as directive and controlling. The president, through uses of personal or positional power, or specific behaviors, was seen as responsible for channelling the activities of others so that desired ends were achieved. The leader was the impelling force that "moves people in the direction of these goals," or gets people to "act, to change their behavior." One respondent used the metaphor of the leader as sheepdog. This social power view, which emphasizes leadership primarily as a process through which leaders act upon others, will be called directive influence.

In the second orientation, the president's role was seen as facilitating and supportive. The president did not direct others, but rather provided encouragement and removed barriers that might have prevented others from achieving desired goals. The leader "unlocks the potential of faculty and staff," or "stimulates people to work for goals." The impelling force is not the leader but inherent in the follower. One respondent used the

metaphor of the leader as cheerleader. This will be referred to as enabling influence.

The distribution of responses of 27 presidents by source of goal and by process of influence is shown in Table 2. Responses of 5 presidents were not included because their responses did not permit an analysis of either the goal source, the influence process, or both.

Table 2 about here

The greater proportion of the respondents (21 of 27, or 77.8%) identified the role of leadership as directing the activities of others towards the achievement of specified goals or objectives. In most cases (13 of 27, or 48.2%) the goals were those identified by the leader; for a smaller number of respondents (8 of 27, 29.6%) the goals were presumably inherent in the institutional mission.

The remaining 6 respondents (22.2%) saw the role of leadership from an enabling rather than from a directive perspective. While leadership for them also involved the establishment of goals, these goals were as likely to have been developed by the group itself and sensed by the leader as they were to have been determined by the leader. Once goals were developed by either means, leadership meant engaging in behavior that facilitated (rather than

directed) the actions of others as they moved towards them.

The overwhelming number of directive as compared to enabling presidents makes further analysis by institutional type or presidential tenure difficult. Among directive presidents, those in community colleges were more likely to identify the mission as the source of institutional goals, and those in universities were more likely to identify the leader. But differences were slight, and all four institutional types were represented among the 6 enabling presidents.

Discussion

No theory of leadership has been found by scholars to be useful or explanatory under all conditions, and it is not surprising that the implicit theories of college and university presidents are quite eclectic. Presidential perceptions about the meaning of the concept of leadership appear to reflect elements of several different theoretical orientations, and in various combinations.

The presidents in this study overwhelming identified leadership, at least in part, in terms of roles and behaviors. Good leadership was seen as being related to what people actually did, with particular emphasis upon

clarifying goals and providing support and motivation for people to achieve them. Most also considered leadership as an influence process, although there was a tendency to give greater emphasis to the influence of leaders on followers than to the mutual influence of social exchange. Trait theories, symbolic theories, or contingency theories were each implicit in the definitions given by smaller numbers of the respondents. Presidential definitions did not appear to be systematically related to factors such as institutional type, control, or presidential tenure.

A majority of the presidents held what might be thought of as a traditional view of leadership. They saw leadership as including a responsibility for deciding the directions in which an institution was to move, and for coordinating the structures and processes that would help it to get there. Leadership could be assessed by the degree to which leaders had a "vision" and followers conformed to it, and leaders had at their disposal many sources of social power and influence to achieve these results. This understanding of leadership identifies the leader as authoritative, but it should not be misunderstood as suggesting that such leaders are authoritarian, or that they are not concerned for the interests of faculty and staff. Directive leaders may listen to the advice of others and may be caring and

solicitous about their welfare. They may be sensitive to the nuances of campus politics and committed to faculty governance. But they believe that leadership requires that in the final analysis it is their responsibility to identify the processes through which the institution is to achieve its goals. Leadership in their definitions was a manifestation of the behavior of an individual.

A smaller group of presidents saw leadership from a different perspective. Some of them believed that leadership required the identification of goals, while others suggested that goals resided in the latent or expressed interests of other organizational participants and were waiting to be discovered. But regardless of where goals arose, this group saw leadership as a group phenomenon rather than an individual characteristic. The role of the leader was not to direct the group, but to facilitate the emergence of leadership latent within it.

There are no data at present to indicate whether having a president with a directive or a facilitating orientation makes a difference to organizational functioning or performance. However, it has been suggested that some organizations have certain characteristics that substitute for or neutralize traditional notions of leadership. Directive leadership may be less effective: In organizations in which

participants have a need for independence, have a professional orientation, or are indifferent to organizational rewards; when the task is intrinsically satisfying; when the organization includes closely-knit and cohesive work groups, rewards are outside the leaders control; when there is spatial distance between the leader and those the leader wishes to influence; when there are participants who have special ability, knowledge, experience, or training; and when tasks provide their own feedback concerning accomplishment. These are common characteristics of colleges and universities, and it may be in such organizations that "to the extent that other sources provide structure and stroking in abundance, the hierarchical leader will have little chance to exert downward influence" (Kerr and Jermier, 1978, p. 400).

Leadership is important, but it may be a mistake to believe that all leadership must come from "leaders." In many colleges and universities much of the required guidance and support may be provided by the qualities of the participants, the nature of the task, or the characteristics of the organization itself. A presidential approach that places less emphasis on directing others and more on empowering them may take advantage of the unusual properties of higher educational institutions. It may be difficult to sustain such an

approach in a political and social climate that appears more insistent on short-term measurement and instant accountability, but doing so may result in long-term institutional benefits.

The data presented in this paper lead to interesting questions. Are presidential theories systematically related to presidential behaviors? Are there organizational factors other than those discussed here that make certain presidential theories more or less likely to emerge? Do assessments of the quality of presidential "leadership" by others on campus vary with presidential theories of either directing or enabling leadership? Perhaps the most interesting question is why so many presidents have adopted a traditional and directive view of leadership, and so few appear to focus upon two-way communication, social exchange processes of mutual influence, and facilitating rather than directing the work of highly educated professionals. Are the behaviors of directive persons for some reason attractive to search committees looking for presidential candidates?, or do facilitating persons become directive presidents because of internal or external pressures to "act like a leader?"

A classic definition of leadership refers to the ability to infuse daily behavior with meaning, to create

an "institutional embodiment of purpose" (Selznick, 1957, p. 149). May it not be true that in many colleges and universities the responsibility of leadership to "interpret the role and character of the enterprise, to perceive and develop models for thought and behavior, and to find modes of communication that will inculcate general rather than merely partial perspectives" (p.150) is not necessarily solely that of presidents or other senior administrators, but in fact in large measure may be fulfilled through the socialization of the participants, professional traditions, and institutional histories? If so, presidents interested in exercising effective institutional leadership may find that social exchange theories provide more fruitful implications for administrative behavior than do social power theories.

Table 1. The implied leadership theories of 32 college and university presidents.

Theoretical Approach	N	%
Trait	8	25.0%
Power and Influence	28	87.5
Behavioral	31	96.9
Contingency	7	21.9
Symbolic	7	21.9

Table 2. The sources of goals identified by presidents in their definitions of "leadership," and the process of leader influence.

	Influence Process		
Goal Source	Directive	Enabling	Total
Mission	8	0	8
Leader	13	3	16
Follower	0	3	3
Total	21	6	27

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